Martín Espada

**The Soldiers in the Garden**  
*Isla Negra, Chile, September 1973*

After the coup,  
the soldiers appeared  
in Neruda’s garden one night,  
raising lanterns to interrogate the trees,  
cursing at the rocks that tripped them.  
From the bedroom window  
they could have been  
the conquistadores of drowned galleons,  
back from the sea to finish  
plundering the coast.

The poet was dying;  
cancer flashed through his body  
and left him rolling in the bed to kill the flames.  
Still, when the lieutenant stormed upstairs,  
Neruda faced him and said:  
*There is only one danger for you here: poetry.*  
The lieutenant brought his helmet to his chest,  
apologized to señor Neruda  
and squeezed himself back down the stairs.  
The lanterns dissolved one by one from the trees.

For thirty years  
we have been searching  
for another incantation  
to make the soldiers  
vanish from the garden.